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UM HEALTH SCREENING RESULTS 'SURPRISING'

By Terry Brenner
University Relations

Are you one of the 80 percent of Americans who don't know what their blood cholesterol level is? If so, maybe this news from The University of Montana will put a bur under your saddle.

In May, UM's Wellness Center, in cooperation with Community Hospital, conducted a health screening program for UM employees, retirees and spouses. It served more than 900 people, the most ever for a spring screening, and did more than 740 blood chemistry screens.

The results were "surprising," Wellness Program director Gordon Opel said.

"We found that one in three individuals who came to our blood chemistry screening had values high enough to warrant visiting their doctor now," he said. "And that ranged over everything from high cholesterol to thyroid problems, elevated blood sugar and liver problems, which show up on the test as abnormal liver enzymes." Another 20 percent of the screening participants were told they had problems that needed watching.

This was not good news considering, first, that UM employees are generally regarded as a healthy population and, second, that people attracted to a health screening are usually the most health-conscious members of any population.

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The findings “speak to the value of this kind of preventive screening,” Opel said, because with any blood chemistry abnormalities you can feel fine and be unaware of lurking problems. Preventive screening in the workplace is particularly valuable, he said.

“It’s convenient for people and affordable,” he said. “Otherwise, you would not get that kind of participation.”

During the screening the Wellness Center also surveyed 222 people with a self-report questionnaire. Participants answered anywhere from two to 23 questions covering 75 specific categories that came under topics such as family and personal health information; physical activity; eating practices; alcohol, drugs and smoking; stress and coping; and medical care.

Here’s a typical kind of question. “How often do you eat snack foods between meals (chips, pastries, soft drinks, candy, ice cream, cookies)?” Participants had multiple choices that covered the range from “three or more times per day” to “seldom or never.”

A summary of the survey findings showed that 75 percent of participants need to change their eating practices, 68 percent have a high cancer risk, 59 percent need to improve their fitness levels, 59 percent have cholesterol levels higher than recommended, 44 percent have a moderate to high risk of coronary disease, and 25 percent have excessive stress or poor coping ability. Only 6 percent are smokers.

When you get these kinds of results from profiling individuals’ health status, people and organizations nationwide should “sit up and take notice,” Opel said. The implications for society, organizations and families are serious. For the Wellness Center, Opel said, the challenge is to follow up on the health screening and survey.

“The easy part is the screening,” he said. “Getting people to go in and follow up on

this and providing the resources to help people is really critical.”

Fifty to 70 percent of all health care costs are related to preventable conditions, he said. At UM less than 1 percent of the health plan goes toward prevention programs. Even so, the Wellness Center conducts two health screenings a year, offers health education lectures, provides campus ergonomics training, does medical referrals, pays the cost of mammograms, provides CPR training for departments and contracts with a counseling service for employees and families.

“Some people say that in this era of ever-increasing health care costs organizations can’t afford wellness programs,” Opel said. “My belief is that we can’t afford not to have wellness programs.”

In a recent global health care survey, which looked at a range of issues such as longevity, infant mortality and access to affordable health care, the United States ranked 24th among industrialized countries in return on investment in health care.

“We have the best health care system in the world, and yet it’s one of the worst,” Opel said. “We’re very good at high-tech medicine, but we’re not doing very well at the routine maintenance of positive health behavior. We need to shift our focus in this society back to basics. That means eating well, managing stress and exercising.”

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